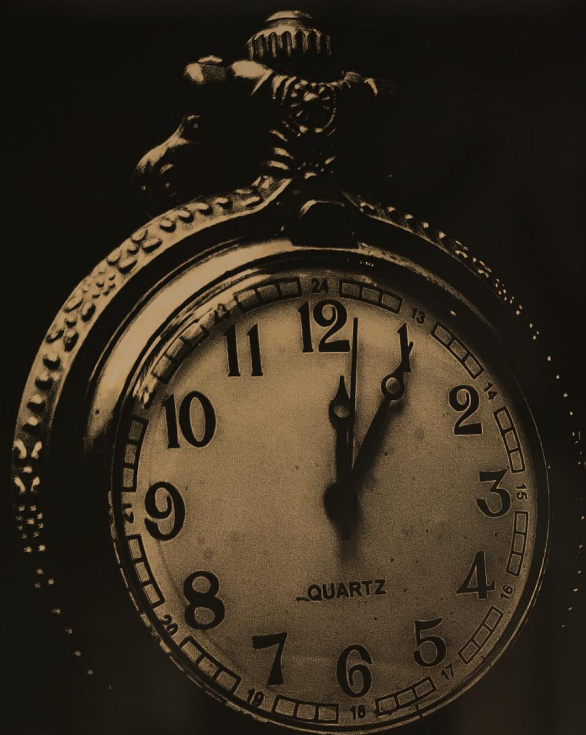


Vincent Lore



FRIEND OF
THE DAMNED

VINCENT LORE

Friend of the Damned

A Runner Owen Story

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The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.

EDGAR ALLEN POE

Friend of the Damned

I cannot forget. I knew when he found me, woke me where I'd collapsed, that I could never forget. Still the snow drifts down in silence, that hideous vision trapped within my memories. I am safe now, shaking in this cold, dark chamber, safe from the world, safe from you. But I look towards the door, waiting. Even now I look over my shoulder, bracing for your cursed silhouette, your smug smile. Yet you are not here.

Do I wish you were?

I know what you've done. I could not even dream of what was to come, but I fancy I felt your eyes upon me as I walked with my cousin that day. Yes, this is the truth, she is my cousin. Did you doubt me before? Even orphans such as I have family. Fools whisper of our courtship, as if myself, being woman-born, could have no true reason to enjoy her company. But she is dear to me, my blonde and bright-eyed Loretta Dunstan.

Don't hurt her. I'm the one you want.

Too cold to walk to the market, she instead treated me to the tea room at the Glint Hall Hotel. I'm sure our presence was noted. With the remodeling finished, all rooms were open, most of all to those not of my standing. The new electric lights hummed overhead, casting sharpened rays on glass and porcelain alike, as well as my own glasses. Goddess, but I prefer

the crackle of crystal-fire to it. Across from me, Loretta smiled every time our eyes met yet I know her too well. I saw the thoughts racing behind them.

I asked, "Is something the matter?"

She looked at the table, smiling fading, and back to my eyes again.

"Owen," she said, "I need your help."

A familiar refrain, from lips that rarely ask anyone for help. I straightened my back against the dark wood of my chair.

"Did you see it?" She asked, her voice low. "The sign in the lobby, for a Miss Dartmere?"

It'd been hard to miss, large as it was. I'd given it an odd glance as we passed it by. Illuminated by the lights reflecting on polished walls and floors, it stood alone, brazen and proud, words beside a drawing of the woman herself.

Theodora Dartmere

Friend of the Dead!

"Yes," I said now, "What of it?"

Loretta glanced around the chairs, the tables surrounding us. No one could judge her for her honesty. No one remained in the room but the expressionless portraits on the walls, and our own reflection in the windows just past us.

"She's been in mourning for almost two years," she spoke, her voice low. "Ever since Gayle Littleton left us." She tapped her fingernail upon her delicate cup. "Do you know anything of her? Either of them?"

I shook my head.

Loretta set her cup down, folded her pale hands together. "Miss Littleton was deeply loved by the Spiritualism Society. Miss Dartmere learned under her for several years, but as they say, both were beautiful and clever, so the mentorship bloomed

to love.” Loretta looked to the door, worrying her bottom lip. “They were to be married. But the consumption took hold of Miss Littleton, and it did not wait for man or god.”

She sighed. “Miss Dartmere refused to leave her bride’s side until the ice melted enough for the burial. After, she was too broken to leave her home. Even now, she wears the black veil and dress of a widow, and refuses to consider another lover.”

Picking up her cup again, Loretta stared into the depths of it. “It is painfully romantic.”

“What a tragedy,” I mumbled. Gayle Littleton must have been loved beyond words... And Miss Dartmere had money to support such grief, not needing to return to the world early in search of it.

“Miss Dartmere returns now,” Loretta said. “She carries on with Miss Littleton’s title, continues with her life’s quest, holding seances and speeches all over our city.” She pressed her lips together. “And yet,” she said. “And yet she’s said nothing of her bride... and Miss Littleton herself has vanished.”

I drew in a quiet breath. Loretta does not often speak of her other-sight to me, to anyone. Being the daughter of the most beloved and controversial factory owner in the city is enough attention for one woman, much less one of her beauty, to handle. But her magic is strong, and wild as dragons. No one knows the dead like my Loretta.

“Vanished?” I whispered.

Loretta nodded, her blonde curls swaying. “I saw her three times, each time close by Miss Dartmere’s side. Miss Dartmere scarcely looked at her. The grief hung like ashes around them both. At the fourth, Miss Dartmere had changed. She stood straight, and her eyes glinted beneath the veil. And Miss Littleton,” Loretta shuddered. “I never saw her again.”

"But why?" I said. "Why would she leave? Wouldn't she have stayed with her love?"

Loretta did not look at me. "I never met Miss Littleton in life," she said, every word careful. "But if their love was true, and I felt in my soul it was, and is..." She frowned. "She would not have left willingly."

I breathed in, I breathed out. "Do you think Miss Dartmere..."

"I tried to ask her about what happened, but she did not seem to understand," Loretta said. "It's hard for me to speak to anyone from the Spiritualism Society however. One wrong word and they'll never give me peace."

Her eyes raised up, and looked at me.

"Owen," she said. "Forgive me. I pray I don't place you in danger by asking for your help. Miss Dartmere has done something, something horrible, and I fear she does not know what. But it is midwinter and the dreaming damned have awoken. Through the snow, they hunt. They hunger. It may be too late to save Miss Littleton, but perhaps you can save Miss Dartmere."

I bowed my head.

"I will do my best."

Long after she left, I lingered, walking alone through the winding halls. A late hour, it was, most of the guests retired to bed, or still gone to parties throughout the capital. I couldn't rest, I couldn't imagine trying. On my tongue, I tasted it, the incense that follows you. I searched for you, searched the whole first floor for you. What would I have done, if I found you? Prayed, I suppose. But perhaps that would have pleased you.

Beyond the old black walls, through the arched windows of the hotel, snow fell through our eternal night. The silence proved painful, and I hid within my thoughts. Much I should have thought about Loretta and her justified fears. A pity the story of the medium's love stirred something within me. Because it was you, only you, I could think of.

I hadn't forgotten your promise. I still haven't.

Glass shattered, breaking through my thoughts. I turned my head towards the sound, for they could only come in one direction, so well-made were those old dark walls. Voices broke out. I could not understand them, but I knew their tone too well. Anger and accusation, raising the hairs upon my arms.

I followed my fear.

Turning a corner, I slowed to a stop. A door, the only one in the wall, stood open, light and words flowing from it. Creeping closer, I listened.

"You saw it!" Through the door I glimpsed a finely suited man, brown of skin and beard, pointing a finger at another.

"You saw it well as we!" he continued. He took a step away from the small velvet covered table, and the half-empty wine bottle upon it. "Not one of us stood near the fireplace. You demanded proof, and it was given before your eyes!"

"My husband speaks truth!" Another voice, a woman, called. Closer to the door I pressed, and saw her, gripping her fan in one shaking hand. Her dark curls tumbled over her brown skin, her skirt of emerald and lace flared as she stared at the same figure. "You challenged the dead, and the dead replied. Now who in this room is the fool?"

I breathed in and almost choked. Lavender and ashes, lavender and wine, lavender and some sweet-spicy potpourri, but most of all, lavender, overpowering lavender. Like a dog's

perfume, the kind I'd used when I'd been a servant, to hide that true canine scent from my betters. My so-called betters, as these people were.

Ducking back against the wall, I forced myself to breathe through my nose, to keep my position a secret. Yet through the door I still saw more, the pale papered walls and the fireplace looming, casting its own light upon the floor, and on the glass that scattered the rug before it. On this glass a shadow fell, and another voice spoke.

"A fine clock it was," the man said, his voice even and cold, and a chill ran up my spine. "It'd been passed down through the Vesperos family to my late husband. It should have gone to my step-daughter, the poor child."

Mr. Rhyne, the owner of the Glint Hall Hotel, stepped forward, and crushed the glass underfoot.

"Do the dead care not for the value of the heart, or the pocketbook?"

Somewhere within the room, a dog whined.

"I'm sorry for your loss," the woman said, and I listened to her footsteps on the rug. "But the dead are the dead. Does it matter, who the clock was meant for? You said it yourself - it was broken anyway."

I chanced it, looked through the door. Rhyne stood, brown hair glinting in the firelight, one hand grasping the cloak draped over his back. His face held no emotion. Only the flush on his fair skin gave a warning of his wrath.

"Does it matter?" Rhyne repeated. "Does it matter when it was broken? Or does it matter that it is fixed?"

A breath of silence.

"It would be petty change for a member of your families." Rhyne added, and now, he smiled.

"I beg your pardon," the woman snapped.

"Ah, but you are the ones who should apologize to me, are you not?" Rhyne said. "After all, Mr. and Mrs. Bestman, you were the ones who proposed this... *farce*."

Another breath of silence.

Rhyne turned towards the door, and met my eyes. His smile glowed with malice.

"What do you make of this, Runner?"

I must've stepped too close to the door. Or perhaps, he'd heard my footsteps. I froze in my spot, trapped within the eyes now locked upon me. Only one person in the room did not stare at me now - a person I'd not seen before, for she hid in the back of the room, behind a table, besides a massive wooden cabinet.

With hesitation, I stepped into the room.

"Forgive my intrusion," I said. "I heard glass shatter and came to see if anyone had been hurt."

Mr. Bestman snorted, and shook his head. Twisting on his foot, he returned to the velvet table, and grasped one of the cups. Mrs. Bestman glared at his back as he took another drink of wine. Rhyne watched my every breath.

"All are fine," Rhyne said, voice flat. "Unless," he said, "The spirit cut themselves upon the glass."

"So you do believe in spirits," Mrs Bestman said.

At the back of the room, the woman at the table looked up. A small chapbook lay on the table, half-hidden beneath her fingers. Though the veil hid her from my distance, she seemed to stare past me, towards the door. Her shoulders heaved with a silent sigh, and her head lowered back to her reading. Beside her, the cabinet, with doors large enough for a man to enter, stood framed by the red curtains. Those curtains shifted as if in

a strong breeze, brushing the scent of lavender over my senses.

I forced a smile onto my face. "Strange things happen in midwinter," I said. "The snow brings an isolation of the soul and madness follows even in grand cities such as ours. Perhaps even the dead can be hurt in times such as this."

Mrs. Bestman smiled, tilting her head forward. "Very true," she murmured.

Rhyne snorted. I bowed my head. Nothing I could say would satisfy that one, that I knew. Instead I turned to him.

I said, "Here, may I look at the clock?"

The frown upon his face deepened. "I scarcely see the need," Rhyne said. "My step-daughter broke it years ago."

Yet with those words, he gestured to the fallen item. Kneeling, I picked up the old artifact as tender as I could. Hard to explain, how it feels to hold something so old, so loved. Heavy in my hands, faded metal and black wood made up the frame of it, with a clock face pale as any of the moons. The numbers glinted gold in the firelight, exposed to the air by the broken glass. The hands remained frozen in place.

"20 of 17." I looked up at Rhyne. "Was that always the time?"

The frown deepened as I stood. "No," Rhyne said. "I suppose the hands must have moved when it fell."

Across the room, the woman called.

"17?" She repeated, lifting up from her seat. Snatching the book from the table, her veil shifted as she looked this way and that. The woman pushed away from the table. "I must depart - the spirits -"

"No, no, Miss Dartmere!" Mrs. Bestman said. She strode across the rug towards the other woman. "That is not for you, not the true time! The clock is broken, dear. Everything is fine. Breathe."

And breathe she did, settling back into her chair. Miss Dartmere shuddered, grasping her chapbook in both trembling hands.

"Yes," she whispered. "Everything is fine."

"Poor woman," Mr. Bestman said. "You've been overextending yourself all night. Care you for some wine?" He lifted up an unused glass from the table. "You have barely touched it, and you brought it yourself!"

"I should not," she said, opening the book again. "For if the spirits need me, I will not be able to hear them. But it brings me joy, to see your happiness in my gift. You have been nothing but kind to me, and I am grateful."

Paying no mind to Rhyne's stare, I placed the clock back upon the mantle.

"Are you well, miss?" I asked, focusing on the woman at the table.

Miss Dartmere started. Her head raised, and for the first time, she seemed to truly see me.

"Runner Rosedown?" she repeated. "From the papers?"

I cannot lie, I blushed.

"Yes, miss," I said. "Tis I."

Miss Dartmere shifted in her seat. "What a... a blessing, your presence is to us."

"I'm sure he won't be staying long," Mrs. Bestman said, gliding in between me and Miss Dartmere. She shifted the folded fan she held. "It is very unbecoming of a man in service to the prince, to spy on innocent souls such as ours." She smiled at me. "But you are still young. I forgive you."

"Scarcely should do such a thing as forgive him!" Mr. Bestman said, taking another sip of his wine glass. "I would have any of my servants thrown out for such impudence, no

matter their age. A dog is a dog, regardless of who owns it." He fixed me with a sharp gaze. "Does your master know you've slipped your leash? Or will one of us be forced to return you to your kennel?"

I could say nothing. Mr. Bestman smiled at his wife.

A hand clasped on my shoulder and I stiffened.

"Never mind the boy, for he is not worth the suffering." So Rhyne said. "Meanwhile, my clock is still broken. Perhaps our guest of honor would be so kind as to pay for its repair?"

"Mr. Rhyne!" Mrs. Bestman stepped back, her hand over her heart. "Have you no decency?"

Miss Dartmere laughed, and there held no joy or light within it.

"Money," she said. "Yes, yes, money is the thing, isn't it?"

With a silent grunt, I pushed the hand off my shoulder. I turned around, locked eyes with Mr. Rhyne, and steeled myself.

"I will pay for it," I said.

Behind me, Mr. Bestman choked out a laugh.

Rhyne smiled. He reached out, brushed a dark strand of hair off my forehead. "You could not afford it," he murmured.

"You underestimate my employer," I said. "I am certain he and I can make some kind of arrangement-"

Something slammed on the table, hard enough to rattle the wood. Miss Dartmere, on her feet again, now stared at the door.

"There, there!" she cried. "Do you hear it?"

I glanced around the room, smelling it again, that heavy, heady lavender. Yet I heard nothing. Naught but the buzzing of the electric lights, and beneath it, the faintest whimper of a dog.

"What did you hear?" Mr. Bestman asked. He walked past the cabinet, glanced behind the curtains, shifted the glass in his hand. "I hear nothing out of place."

Miss Dartmere sighed, heavy as her hidden gaze, staring at, beyond, the white tablecloth.

"Money," she repeated. "If only I'd had money, then my bride would be at rest."

Rhyne chuckled behind me, sickly sweet and polite. His hand again grasped my shoulder, his breath rushing over my ear.

"Again!" Miss Dartmere called, standing once more. She pointed to the door. "There is someone outside."

"She's gone mad," Rhyne said.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Mr. Bestman spat. "By goddess, she's a medium, of course she's hearing something!"

"What do you hear?" Mrs. Bestman reached for Miss Dartmere's hands. "Tell me, Friend of the Dead! Who is coming?"

"She is coming!" Miss Dartmere called, grasping Mrs. Bestman's hands. "I forgot to check the time - oh, forgive me, I'm sorry, you did not need to hear this."

"Hear?" Mrs. Bestman repeated.

Miss Dartmere pulled away, stepping out from behind the table, allowing a glimpse of the pale canine behind her skirt. Her hands gripped her veil, she threw it aside, exposing black eyes in a pale face.

"She is coming! I hear her footsteps - oh those familiar footsteps, coming down the hall! She returns! She returns!"

"Does she - can she mean Miss Littleton?" Mr. Bestman gasped.

"So that is it?" Rhyne said, patting my shoulder. "She returns? Then let me greet her!"

He turned on his heel, cloak swaying around his feet as he marched towards the door. He stepped into the hall, looked

both ways. Turning around to face us once more, he spread his arms wide.

"What a surprise," he cried. "Nothing! No one! You are alone!"

He stepped back into the room, arms still spread.

Behind him, the door slammed shut.

I've never seen Rhyne look so surprised since I met him. Turning around, he gripped the doorknob, twisting it, banging upon the wood. Banging upon it, so hard I thought it would break. It did not.

He looked over his shoulder, eyes wide.

"This door does not have a lock," he said, and looked at me. "Damn you Runner, this is your fault!"

"What do you mean, it's my fault?" I cried.

"It's always your fault!" he hissed. His gaze turned to Miss Dartmere. "Whatever friends you've called on, tell them to let us out!"

Miss Dartmere did not answer. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Gayle?" she called. "Dearest Gayle? Are you there?"

'Twas not my imagination how the lights flickered, buzzing loud with hunger. All of us stood in silence, staring at Miss Dartmere, but most of all, husband and wife stared in rapt fascination. As if unable to look away. Even now, I remember how her voice shook as she said that name again. I wish I could forget.

"Gayle?" She whispered, as if holding in a sob.

Again the lights flickered. A door upon the cabinet creaked. The dog, wherever it was, whined, its pale form ducking behind a couch and flinging the scent of lavender towards me.

"Please, Gayle," Miss Dartmere said. She raised her hands towards the ceiling. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!"

The darkness answered.

"My friend!" the darkness shouted. "Please help me!"

I went cold.

Mrs. Bestman covered her smile with her hand. "That's Miss Littleton's voice!" she cried, half-terror, half-delight.

"Bull!" Rhyne whispered, but his voice shook, and his hand clamped onto my shoulder.

The voice came again, "Help me!"

Miss Dartmere whimpered, her eyes closing as the tears drifted from her eyes.

"Please, please, oh goddess please! Help me! Help me!" The walls glinted, as if wet with tears, in the buzz of the flickering light. "It is cold," the spirit repeated. "I'm so cold. My friend, my friend, my friend! Help me! I am alone! Help me!"

Mr. Bestman looked at Miss Dartmere.

"What does she mean?" He said. "What is she talking about?"

Miss Dartmere leaned against the table, her face hidden in her hand.

"I let her down," she said, her shoulders shaking. "I failed her. I could not help her rest."

A door on the cabinet creaked.

"Dear," Mrs Bestman said, moving to touch Miss Dartmere's shoulder. "What are you talking about?"

"She told me," Miss Dartmere let out a sob. "She begged me to bury her beside her sister. But I couldn't! I could only place her in Whitehall!"

"Whitehall!" Mrs. Bestman cried, covering her mouth.

"As if she were no better than a servant," Mr. Bestman gasped.

"I couldn't help it!" Miss Dartmere shouted, wrapping her arms around herself. "I could not afford better! To help her would send me to my own grave, in a debtor's prison, and oh, if I could only have given myself that courage. At least I would

be with her in death..."

"My friend!" The spirit cried.

Rhyne's breath rushed over my skin again.

"And now, every night, from the hour of her death, she comes to me," Miss Dartmere said. "She comes and begs for my help. Help I cannot give her!"

The cabinet cast a shadow upon the room, one of the doors shivering on its hinges. Shadows crawled upon the walls, darkening the expressions on the portraits, hollowing the faces of the living and the long dead. The dog pressed against my leg. I did not look down but with my gloved hand, I scratched the poor thing on its boney little head. Poor creature, I thought, it did not understand. Or maybe, I was the one who did not understand, even as the spirit begged for help again.

"Oh," Miss Dartmere said, swaying, shifting back towards her seat, "Oh, what I would do to help her."

She slumped on the table, face hidden in her hands, weeping. Beneath the buzz of the struggling lights, the creak of the electric chandelier swaying overhead, a clock ticked ticked as if were a frightened heartbeat.

Mrs. Bestman twisted towards her husband. "It's our time!" She said. Gripping her skirt in both hands, she leaned over the table to look at Miss Dartmere. "Dearest, how much do you need?"

Miss Dartmere shifted her hands, one falling upon her still open book. She did not look up, tears glinting in the light. I could not hear the price, but Mrs. Bestman clapped her hands.

"I will pay it!" She said.

"Blood's fever, you will!" Mr. Bestman said. "I am your husband. I will pay it!"

"Of course they will," Rhyne whispered into my ear. "Just like

clockwork.”

The Bestmans did not hear him, or the creaking of the cabinet door.

“Don’t be silly, my love,” Mrs. Bestman said. “My family can afford this! It will not be necessary to remove anything from our coffers.”

“Your money must be kept to the charities,” he said, his voice an artificial softness. “How will you help the poor and the needy, if you do this? And your father—”

“Don’t bring him into this,” she snapped. “Not at this time, this place.”

“I must pay it!” Mr. Bestman insisted. “It is my responsibility and I will hear no discussion. The goddess will smile upon our family, upon us both, but if I fail in my position, she will be unsatisfied and tear her goodness away.”

Rhyme’s hand settled upon my lower back. His breath again brushed my ear.

“Do you see it too, Owen?” He whispered.

The lights flickered again, the buzzing growing louder even as the chandelier grew dim. The spirit breathed, weeping as if in my ears. Strange shadows passed over the walls, stretching like fingers over the portraits of the dead. Again the dog whined. Again the cabinet door creaked. I stared at it.

I shuddered.

Rhyme let me go. I followed the darkness past the Bestmans towards the cabinet.

“There now,” Mrs. Bestman said. “Everything is going to be—”

Miss Dartmere’s head snapped towards me. “What are you doing?” She cried.

Of the two doors on the cabinet, twas the first that’d come ajar. The knob, cold in my hand, I still remember the cold of it

beneath my gloves. The door opened, a breath of lavender over my face. Nothing inside. The second door clung to the walls of the cabinet. I pried with all my might. It clicked, it swung open.

Nothing inside.

The chandelier swung to a halt. The shadows froze upon the wall. The tablecloth shivered as something slipped beneath it, and stopped. Even the spirit fell quiet. A heaviness fell upon the room, the buzz of the lights, the tick of the clock, I remember, I remember. I was so afraid.

I looked at Miss Dartmere, and she looked back. I watched a strange pallor cross her cheeks, her lips part with words unsaid. She looked from the empty cabinets, to my eyes.

I forced myself to breathe.

"There was supposed to be someone in there, wasn't there?" I said.

Silence swelled.

"Whore!" Mr. Bestman shouted. "You whore!"

The blow knocked me back into the cabinet. I gripped my glasses to keep them on my face as Mr. Bestman roared.

"You scarlet-faced harlot of the streets! Wretch unworthy of the mantle of man! You brazen liar, accusing one of your betters of - of-" He raised his hand again, and I raised my arms to protect myself from his fist.

Somewhere out of my sight, Rhyne laughed.

"You are no better than the prince who keeps you as his pet!" Mr. Bestman shouted. "You'll be thrown back to the brothel that birthed you, when the papers learn of your impudence!"

"Don't talk about the Sire Commandant like that!" Mrs. Bestman cried. "Bad enough you've hit his servant, what will befall us when he hears of this?"

I rested my hand upon my cheek, and thought of you. I should

have thought of my prince, but it was you I thought of. You and your wrath, much like my prince's, displayed in ways so similar, and so different.

"Impudence..." I said, raising my eyes to look at him. "Pet, you say? Perhaps I am. I do what I'm told, after all. Even in this, I do no more than obey. For it is no coincidence that I am here at the same place as you, and him."

My heart raced faster than the tick of the clock. Forcing myself to look at Miss Dartmere, I found her still looking at the empty cabinet. Through the pain, I made myself speak.

"Miss Dartmere," I said. "Do you remember Loretta Dunstan? You've met her before, I was told."

"Shut up!" Mr. Bestman cried, "You shameless sham of a man--"

Gripping his shoulder, Rhyne dragged him back.

"Enough of that. Let the wretch speak," Rhyne growled.

I breathed, I continued, speaking over the whining of the dog.

"She worried for you. She knew something had gone wrong. And I knew as well. You are a medium, are you not? You see the dead wherever you go. Yet I've been told you did not see your bride when she remained by your side. You never looked at her, never spoke to her, once. And when she vanished--"

"What are you babbling about?" Mr. Bestman said. "This means nothing!"

"Hardly nothing!" Rhyne spat. Mr. Bestman cried out, and in the corner of my eye, landed upon one of the couches. Rhyne adjusted his gloves.

"Hardly nothing," he repeated. "I read the newspapers when that woman passed. Miss Littleton died at 14 past 14 - almost three hours ago!"

I startled.

"You knew?" I cried.

"Knew?" He laughed. "I knew the fraud before it'd even begun! That cabinet's pressed against a door. I'd bet my own money it has a false back!"

"This isn't true. This isn't possible!" Miss Dartmere jumped from her chair, so hard the thing banged on the floor. She searched the darkness, looked at every face, as if searching for a friendly face. She looked at me, sallow-faced, and gestured to the room. "Explain all of this, then! Explain this madness that's swallowed and trapped us within this room!"

I hesitated.

"It's midwinter," I stammered. "When the dead wake and the damned roam."

Overhead the electric lights sputtered, and went out. Darkness draped over the room, all but the dying fire glinting on the glass before the fireplace.

The buzzing continued.

"Miss Dartmere," I whispered. "What have you done?"

Something banged upon the door. A voice shouted Rhyne's name, but none of us moved.

"Have you angered something?" I begged. "Something, someone, dead or alive?"

"No, no!" Miss Dartmere cried. "I am innocent! I have done no wrong!"

"You lied to them," Rhyne said, cold. "You lied to all of us, tried to lie to me, lied to the people of being more gifted in magic than you are. Isn't that a wrong?"

"You tried to trick us!" Mrs. Bestman said. "You wanted our money from the start. Isn't that the truth? Isn't that a wrong?"

"Is that why you brought the wine?" Mr. Bestman whispered. "To relax us, to confuse us, to deceive us?"

Lavender, overpowering in my nose, a dog pawing at my trousers. A buzzing like a thousand flies, rushing over my ears. The pain throbbing on my cheek. I pushed through it.

"Please," I said. "Let me help you. Please be honest with me. Please tell me what-"

"Honest?" Miss Dartmere said. "After all that has occurred, you want me to be honest?"

She laughed. She leaned against the table, placed her hand over her heart, and laughed.

"How can I be honest!" She shouted. "Nothing about this is honest! What do I care about honesty? Honesty pays for nothing!" Her breath rushed in with violent shudders. "Honesty, honesty, what does it matter. None of this matters. Spirits and curses and the occult, love itself - it's all a lie! As my wife taught me, and trained me, I should have known it was all a lie!"

She swayed, so hard I took a step to catch her if she swooned. Over her panting breaths, the panting of a dog, the buzzing of the lights, the clock ticked.

"Why are you doing this?" Miss Dartmere whispered, staring at me. "Are you the Goddess? Is that who you are? An avatar sent down to bring retribution?"

"Breathe, Miss Dartmere! You're going to faint!" I cried.

"Let me faint," she said. "Let me swoon as she did. Let me die as she did. Would it be better - wouldn't it be better than - than -" she laughed, she sobbed. "Did he lie, too? Did the priest send you, Runner?"

"Priest?" I repeated, and shook my head. "No! Loretta Dunstan, she asked me-"

"Miss Dunstan?" She repeated, her eyes wild. "She's beautiful. A beautiful woman." She shook her head, she stared with feverish hate. "But she'll never be yours, Rosedown. Never,

not any more than Gayle was mine.” She smiled, and the hatred was not for me. “Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful things, women are, like flowers in bloom, as the flowers on her coffin, the verbena and the marigolds and the lavender-”

Her breath hitched. “And just as easily devoured. Devoured by time, devoured by insects - by death and the damned themselves!” She wrapped her arms tight round her body, as if latched within a straightjacket. “So beautiful they are! So beautiful until death comes to kiss the corpse, kiss my bride in my stead! So beautiful until the skin swells and the flesh melts, and all the luscious hair drops in clumps from that once smiling head! Death, who made me a cuckold - Death, who ripped my beautiful wife from me!”

And the tears rushed down her cheeks.

“A repulsive woman,” she said with a groan, “I can hear it even now. I can hear it over the prayers I received from the priest - that son of a bitch -” she hiccupped through her tears. “He promised me, Owen. He promised I would never meet that fate. To be eaten - to be stripped to the bone. But he lied! In my soul I know it! He’s damned me! He lied!”

She lunged forward, grabbed my shoulders, gripped me with bruising power.

“Can’t you hear it?” She cried. “They buzz and chew and laugh, laugh! The insects, servants of death. They are eating her even now! Eating the woman I loved!”

She released me, dropped to her knees. I covered my mouth with my hand, because yes I heard it. I’d heard it from the moment I’d stepped into the building, that evil buzz. I heard it then and I knew. I knew. I knew what you’d done.

I fell to my knees, and cried out in despair - “Pray!” I gripped Miss Dartmere’s hands. “All of you!” I cried, and to her I said -

“As you did when you were a child - *Pray!*”

Yes, I prayed, I prayed to my Goddess for mercy on her soul. For salvation, for safety, for a miracle. I heard them all, perhaps I even heard Rhyne, all praying, praying, praying, against the sickness you wrought. I prayed. And I heard the footsteps circling.

I wish it had been you.

I wish it had been your hand upon my shoulder. I wish it had been your voice chuckling within my ear.

Miss Dartmere’s eyes stayed closed. She stumbled over the Compassion Prayer, tears running down her cheeks. She did not see it. Did anyone see it but me? That skeletal hand, reaching over my shoulder, burrowing without a sound into her chest, wrapping around her heart.

I heard the squeeze.

They told me I screamed for a doctor as she dropped. I recall nothing of that. I remember the tears. The door slamming open. Rhyne shouting. An argument. The cold, cold darkness outside the hotel.

I remember.

Miss Dartmere is dead. Dead, at the same moment the clock froze upon. My master the prince searched all her rooms, but you’d gotten there first. Whatever you stole, I cannot imagine, but it must have been far more valuable than any of the devices used to fake the spirits in her seances. What was so valuable to cause you to do this? I almost want to thank you for sparing her assistants. I almost wonder if you are why they were all unconscious when the searchers descended.

You gave the papers their fun. I cannot leave this little sanctuary for fear of being mobbed. The Bestmans have enjoyed the attention they’ve gained, their friends within the media have

ensured it. Mr. Bestman must've had a change of heart, once the alcohol left his head, for there's been nothing but praise for me in the papers, for my clear thinking, for my piety and pure heart.

I heard they are making a play of it... What a dreadful thing. What a delight for you.

Miss Dartmere is dead, but her memory remains. The Spiritualism Society denounced her fraud before her body went cold. Had she not schemed to trick the Bestmans into surrendering their money, would she still be here? Humans are the cause of our own problems, and you are so skilled at taking advantage of them, of us. 'Twas very clever of you to give her that book of spells, knowing she would not tell it apart from a true book of prayers. She prayed in that old tongue of yours, and never imagined what fate she called upon, for herself, and her dead bride.

She's dead. You killed her. And no one will ever understand but me. Even my cousin, and my own master cannot grasp what you've done. Damn you for this knowledge, this isolation.

And that should be the end of it. The world will forget this, forget her, and life will move on. Miss Dartmere is buried beside her fallen bride, and that cursed little book you gave her is hidden behind glass in my prince's office. But it's not over, is it? Because I know what I saw, after she died, in the cold frozen streets.

The chill of winter air must have revived me. I fought my way back to my feet, alone upon those stairs. Shivering, shivering in snow I stood, my shadow swallowed by the buildings around me. No footsteps, no voices, only the breathing of falling snow.

And through the silence I saw her. Rushing through the distance, I saw her. Her black mourning dress in tatters as

she fled. Her mouth, screaming, screaming, in silence. Miss Dartmere fled, and she could not have run fast enough. For they chased her, those evil spirits. In silence they followed, they howled, they smiled. Yes, they smiled, smiled with human teeth in human skulls, bones held together with blackened tendons. On all fours they chased, human hands and feet burying into the snow, spines stretched and swollen to allow the mockery of canine movements. Their fingerbones sharpened into little knives, drops of black drool burning into the cold and pristine snow.

From my distance, I smelled lavender.

One raced at the front, body shuddering with hot breath rising into the air. Its human hand snapped out, snagging her ankle. She did not see me. She could not have seen me. She did not scream aloud as she hit the frozen earth with a painful thud. I wish I'd screamed. I wish I could have. But the world remained frozen, and I remained frozen, my mouth dry as cold metal, watching them descend.

I heard the fabric tear. Blunt human teeth ripping through black crepe. Hair running between the teeth, and blood, deep red, following, leaving no trace on the snow. Her body, just a memory of flesh, of life, her spirit screaming in silence at the memory of pain as they consumed her. Flesh torn apart. Teeth breaking through the bones.

I wish I could forget.

I can't forget how the one at the front consumed Miss Dartmere's heart. How the black veins of its body wrapped around the gnawed upon bones. How the light returned into Miss Dartmere's empty, chewed open, eye sockets.

I wish I could forget, how that one wicked spirit looked up at me and smiled. Smiled as the beast that was Miss Dartmere

shifted, and spread fingers and toes into the snow. Smiled and looked at me, though it had no lips to smile, no eyes to see. It raised a sharpened hand and pointed to me.

I should have been too far away, yet I heard it speak. I heard it speak in Gayle Littleton's voice.

"Thank you," she said, "My helpful friend."

And the cold swallowed me whole.

I awoke in the arms of my prince, cradled, and safe, his warmth reviving me as he called my name. He called to me, and I called back, my body stiff and chilled. I raised my hand to his face, stroked my fingers over his deep brown skin. And I thought of you, and I know, he did too.

He will never believe me, but I know what you've done.

Oh, Scarred Man, my beloved adversary, you won't get away with this.